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A SUGGESTED INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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So to teach English literature that the pupil may be stimulated to the reading of good books is one of the most difficult, as it is one of the most important problems in secondary education. Most teachers have at last discarded the "compendium" and the "epitome," mere literary cellulose squeezed dry of all substance and nutriment; but, unfortunately, there has been substituted for them, too often, nothing but scraps of indigestible "criticism." The new way is even more futile than the old; and, if the only alternative to facts at second hand is to be theories and opinions at second hand, let us, by all means, choose the lesser evil by clinging to the old "compendium." The average pupil will be as little interested in critical pottering as in biographical twaddle; and neither leads to a love of literature.

The compendium method and the (so-called) critical method of teaching literature fail of the desired end because they isolate the subject with which they deal and identify books with nothing under the sun excepting the individuals who produced them. Whereas the book-writer is of little consequence in comparison with his books; and books should be studied, not as isolated creations, but as landmarks and way-signs of the time in which they were written. Literature is the flower of history; but to know, to appreciate, to love this blossoming, one must know the plant from which it sprang. To drag a pupil, therefore, who knows not English social and economic history, back to Beowulf, and to push him thence through the, to him, meaningless wastes of early English literature is, we now understand, a process as useless as it is distressing. We do not perceive so clearly, perhaps, that the reversed process, by which he is pushed backward from modern "criticism" to Saxon or Norman or Renaissance "begin-

nings," is scarcely more effective and is even less logical. While the first task requires of the pupil little (for the passing of examinations) except powers of memory and an ability to keep awake, the second presupposes a historical insight rare even among collegians, a critical sense that comes only with maturity, and a grasp of style that must wait upon slow cultivation.

Two things are necessary to interest an average pupil in any subject: the course of study must be based upon what he already knows, and it must be put into relationship with subjects which arouse him. The only study directly related to literature with which the ordinary pupil who enters the high school is familiar is American history; the only topics which, as a rule, engage his interest are the events of the day. Upon these slight and rather inconvenient mental pegs, therefore, we must hang his study of English literature. We must begin this subject—whose right beginning is so difficult and so essential—by tracing the growth of literature in the United States, by showing the parallelism of that growth to our political and social progress, and by making plain how large a factor literature has been and always will be in human history. In so doing, I believe, such an appreciation of good books and such a love for their study will be aroused in most pupils that they will be ready for an intelligent and receptive acquaintance with the larger literature of Great Britain.

The following outline of work, based upon the use of American as the first step in English literature, is, of necessity, not only tentative but crude. It must, in actual practice, be greatly modified; it must, under all conditions, be flexible. Its general drift should be adapted to the prevailing temper of each class and it should be subdivided and individualized to meet the tastes and aptitudes of single pupils. The teacher must be enthusiastic, must have the historical as well as the critical sense fully developed, must possess the knowledge and skill necessary to a graphic summing-up of books. Indeed, the success of this course of instruction is peculiarly dependent upon the personality of the instructor. Its value rests, too, upon the thoroughness and saneness of the teaching in United States history which has been

given in the grammar schools. It is essential, to be more explicit, that this instruction shall have dealt with the social and economic rather than with the military and diplomatic events of our history, that it shall have considered impulses and measures rather than wars and men. A pupil properly taught in the history of the United States ought to know, upon entering the high school, the causes as well as the details of our industrial and political growth, the foundation as well as the fact of our democracy, the evolution as well as the chronology of our national progress.

A pupil so prepared should be able to cover easily in two years a course in American literature based upon the following skeleton of work which, for the sake of simplicity, is put in mandatory form. This scheme presupposes that only few books, or parts of books, will be read in class, that biographical details will be studied only so far as they markedly influenced an author's work, that condensation of thought, of speech, of writing, are to be developed as rapidly as possible in the pupil, that all his reading out of school is to be in the line of his classwork, and that a good public or school library is readily accessible.

Examine the pupils, individually, to ascertain if every one of them has firmly in mind an outline of the growth of the United States. If not, review the subject, pointing out the salient phases of national progress. Make sure that the students have a mental picture of the social conditions of the Colonies, that they appreciate the period of comparative mental degeneracy which intervened between, roughly speaking, 1675 and 1750, and that they understand the causes of the Revolutionary War.

Calling attention to the early founding of colleges and schools, show why the Colonial literature was, necessarily, either theological or narrative. Read extracts from Edwards, from the *Magnalia*, from Winthrop's *Journal*. Interest some of the pupils, if possible, in a study (outside the classroom) of the Colonial chronicles. Give practice in the writing of narrative. Read in class, rapidly, portions of Franklin's *Autobiography*.

Sketch the rise of political literature and its close adherence to the forms of theological writing. Study the beginnings of the

newspaper, comparing the *News Letter* or the *Centinel* with the modern dailies. Call attention to the flood of pamphlets and show their relationship to the modern periodical. Read, in class, certain of the simpler *Federalist* papers and arouse individual interest, if possible, in the literature of the Constitution. Show the use of invective, exaggeration, and other rhetorical qualities peculiar to debate. Encourage the impartial discussion of political questions, avoiding mere wordy fencing.

Make clear the reasons for the modern decay of letter-writing, emphasizing the importance of a good epistolary style. Read certain letters of Washington's, of Jefferson's, and from the *Diplomatic Correspondence*. Give careful practice in letter-writing.

Trace the growth of oratory. Show the necessities that called it into being and its connection with the pamphlet. Study some of the orations of Henry, Webster, Everett, and Sumner. Compare, to some extent, their methods of persuasion. Give practice in abstracting, by requiring pupils to condense a familiar oration; also in expansion, by making them develop an oration from a simple list of facts.

Show the rise of an enduring American literature with the advent of the native romance. Demonstrate the influence of environment by contrasting Irving and Cooper with Hawthorne. Show that the strength and originality of these authors came from their use of native material. Read, in class, portions of the *Sketch Book* and of the *House of the Seven Gables*. Urge the reading, out of school, of the *Leatherstocking Tales* and of those romances by Hawthorne that are based upon American life.

Trace, as far as possible, the rise of transcendentalism out of the peculiar conditions in New England, its expression in Brook Farm (*Blithedale Romance*), and its best fruitage in Emerson. Read, in class, portions of the *Conduct of Life*, and try to arouse an interest in similar essays. Contrast the social teaching of Emerson with the individualism of Thoreau, if the class be competent to grasp it.

Explain that the conditions in the United States, the engrafting of an old civilization upon a rich, new country, could scarcely

fail to produce such a group of nature poets as we possess. Study Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier. Read shorter poems of each and make obligatory, if possible, the reading, outside, of *Evangeline*, *Hiawatha*, and *Legends of New England*. Discuss, broadly, poetic forms and the reasons for poetry. Endeavor to interest the pupils in this, but do not drive them to it.

Demonstrate the influence of the transcendentalists and poets upon the anti-slavery agitation. Read, in class, portions of the *Biglow Papers* and some of Whittier's anti-slavery hymns. Show the importance, at this crisis, of our fondness for oratory. Read one or more speeches of Garrison and Phillips. Explain the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, emphasizing the point that the value of a book may come from its opportuneness quite as much as from its intrinsic merit.

Deal with the historians: Bancroft, Hildreth, Palfrey, Prescott, Motley, Parkman, as fully as time and the temper of the class warrant. If a critical reading of them, or of some of them, out of school, can be brought about, the main object will be attained. Warn the pupils against rhetorical narrative and teach them, if possible, how to sift facts from theories in historical reading.

Explain why with the close of the Civil War a new era in our literature began. Show that it is now in a transition state toward cosmopolitanism. Show the influence of our peculiar humor, studying especially Holmes, Bret Harte, and "Mark Twain," as types. Trace, as far as may be, the effect, on the one hand, of our journalistic spirit; on the other, of our fondness for self-analysis. Touch lightly upon current writers and emphasize the necessity of perspective in the forming of correct judgments. Guide the pupil's outside reading in the books of today. Help him to discriminate between the permanent and the ephemeral.

Such a course as has been outlined cannot fail, when developed by a good teacher possessing literary insight, to reach in some measure all those pupils in whom it is possible to arouse any interest. Many boys and girls are wholly lacking in the comprehension of books, and upon such the teacher's time is thrown away. They ought to be dropped from the course in

literature, if not, indeed, from the high school itself. No method could be devised by which their eyes would be unsealed. To the majority of pupils, however, this introductory course may well serve for that all-important first step which, rightly taken, makes later steps easy and increasingly delightful. Only when boys and girls, young men and women, shall understand that literature is an important factor in civilization, only when they shall learn to distinguish good thoughts from poor thoughts, solid writing from tawdry writing, will the swelling tide of bad books be stayed. Were our secondary schools to find some way of teaching literature so that it would penetrate and permeate the pupil's life, such a social leaven would be set at work that we should no longer have cause to sigh for real culture, to apologize for the newspapers, and to blush at the contents of the railway bookstands.